

Black Teachers Matter: Qualitative Study of Factors Influencing African American Candidates Success in a Teacher Preparation Program

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perspectives and experiences of ten African American students at a predominantly White institution to understand why students persisted or discontinued in the teacher preparation program. Findings indicate three predominant factors influence Black candidates' decision to complete or leave the program: the role K–16 teachers play in inspiring African American candidates to become educators, a desire for social justice that motivates African American undergraduate students to embrace or reject teaching as a career, and the role of standardized exams and financial barriers in preventing African Americans from completing education programs.

***Keywords:* African American preservice teachers, teacher preparation program, diversity**

There is a lack of parity in our nation's classrooms and teacher preparation programs for African Americans. While Black teachers account for 6.8% of classroom teachers (Goldring, Gray & Bitterman, 2013), Blacks represent 12% of the overall population and 16% of K–12 students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). Furthermore, the percentage of male Black students is three times as high as the number of male Black teachers (Toldson, 2013). Unfortunately, this disparity seems likely to persist. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), only 9% of the students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in 2009-2010 identified as Black. Therefore, it comes as no shock that our school of education struggles to attract African American students, averaging 1–2 Black candidates in each cohort. However, the authors were shocked in the Spring 2015 when the first Black candidate since 2008 graduated from the program. For an institution with a mission of social justice and “educating talented and diverse students of many faiths, ages, nations, and cultures,” the lack of African Americans graduating from our program was a serious concern.

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons African American students entered our teacher preparation program (TPP) as well as why they left. Findings will inform teacher preparation programs (TPPs) about trends in African American candidates' enrollment and matriculation, which could have implications for policies and programming. Additionally, this study will contribute to the professional literature on recruiting and retaining African American candidates in TPPs.

Factors Influencing African American Candidates

Today, it is hard to fathom that in 1950 almost half of the African American professionals in the U. S. were teachers (Foster, 1989). In the ensuing years, several factors have contributed to fewer African American students entering TPPs and the teaching profession.

Barriers to Blacks Entering the Teacher Preparation Programs

Scott and Rodriguez (2015) assert that the shortage of African American teachers starts in high schools with the “pervasive academic underachievement” of Black students due to “contemporary forms of racism and hegemonic ideologies” manifest in practices like “high stakes testing, academic tracking, disciplinary practices and teacher perceptions of minority students” (p. 2). Thus, many African American students never graduate from high school or enter college. For students who do graduate and go to college, their negative high school experience often discourages them from considering teaching. African American high school students perceived schools to be oppressive institutions and that teachers devalued their experiences and voices. Students attribute these factors to the reason they encountered so few Black teachers (Graham & Erwin, 2011).

The lack of teachers of color in their own K–12 classrooms is a barrier to Black students entering TPPs (Bianco, Leech & Mitchell, 2011; Graham & Erwin, 2011). In over 40 percent of public schools there is not a single teacher of color (United Negro College Fund, 2008). Most notable is the absence in the classroom of African American male teachers. Black males represent less than 2% of teachers, and the percentage of Black male students is more than three times the percentage of Black male teachers (Toldson, 2013). Research indicates a number of reasons African American males do not enter TPPs: perceived low levels of respect for the teaching profession, low college enrollment for African American males, and the perception that teaching is not a masculine profession (Bianco, Leech & Mitchell, 2011).

The literature points to several other barriers to African Americans entering the teaching profession. Black students perceive teaching salaries as low (Smith, Mack & Akyea, 2004) and working conditions, including disciplinary problems, as difficult (King, 1993). Since the middle of the 20th century, career opportunities have been increasing for African Americans. Teachers often discourage academically gifted students from pursuing teaching as a career (Sullivan & Dzuban, 1987), and many Blacks are pursuing

careers in more financially lucrative careers with higher prestige and more opportunities for growth (Gordon, 1994; Shipp, 1999).

Barriers to Blacks Graduating from Teacher Preparation Programs

Despite the barriers, a percentage of students entering colleges and universities do choose to enter teacher preparation programs (TPPs); however, once in TPPs, barriers still exist. For many students of color, high school has not properly prepared them for higher education. The six-year graduation rate for African American college students is 40.5 percent. The high cost of college also forces some African American students to leave and others to pursue majors in more lucrative careers in order to repay student loans (Bireda & Chait, 2011). Additional barriers include increased requirements for getting into, staying in and exiting TPPs. In the state of Kentucky, the Education Professional Standards Board increased the GPA required to enter, remain in, and exit a TPP from 2.5 to 2.75, which has negatively impacted students of color (Ahern et al., 2014). This governing body also began requiring students to pass the Praxis I test of basic skills to enter a TPP. Minority candidates have traditionally had lower pass rates than White candidates (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Consistent with this literature, African American students' passing rates on the Praxis I exam are 35% lower than their White counterparts (Tyler et al., 2011). Teacher licensure exams (Praxis II) also negatively impact Black candidates.

Another barrier for African American teacher candidates is stereotype threat, which is defined as "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype" (Steele, 2003, p. 111). In a study of three African American male students enrolled in a TPP, Scott and Rodriguez (2015) found that Black students were negatively affected by stereotype threats through racial micro-aggressions embedded in the culture of higher education where Whiteness is communicated as the norm. These microaggressions included professors who abused their power and privilege, made derogatory remarks about students, communicated low expectations

and perceptions of inferiority to African American candidates, and enabled White students to speak openly about their racial bias to students of color. These microaggressions had a detrimental impact on African American preservice teachers' academic performance and consideration for continuing in the program. While the research of Scott and Rodriguez (2015) focused on Black males, research "supports that stereotype threat can harm the academic performance of any individual for whom the situation invokes a stereotype-based expectation of poor performance" (Stroessner & Good, 2011). The impact of stereotype threat on the academic performance of all Black students is supported by Kellow and Jones (2008) who found that stereotype threat has the potential to negatively impact African American students in testing situations. Likewise, the research of Osborne and Walker (2006) supports the negative impact of stereotype threat on academic retention. Osborne and Walker found that stereotype threat can result in the physical and psychological withdrawal of minority students. African American students in TPPs must also overcome what King (1991) identified as "dysconscious racism"—a form of racism that tacitly accepts and thereby reifies dominant White norms and privileges (Kornfield, 1999). In a study of female African American students, Kornfield (1999) found Black students were often confronted by the classmates and professors who were indifferent, and sometimes openly hostile, to their experiences and perspectives. Successful African American preservice teachers identified role models who provided the motivation to help them persist. In a study of six African American female teachers, Farinde, LeBlanc and Otten (2015) found that support and positive feedback from their cooperating teachers and professors assisted them in completion of their TPPs.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach to understand why African American students at one predominantly White midwestern liberal arts university selected education as their major of study and why they either remained in education or opted to leave. African American undergraduate students between 2005 and 2015 were

Dinkins and Thomas

considered for inclusion. The university, where both authors are professors, enrolled 2,651 undergraduate students with 335 students of color, and 147 education students as of spring 2016.

Participants

To identify African American students who enrolled as education majors at any point in their undergraduate career from 2005 to 2015, we (a) systematically examined university data bases, (b) searched class rolls, and (c) confirmed these results with past and present education school administrators. This purposeful sampling yielded 20 possible participants. Ten participants agreed to participate: seven females and three males. Four are active teachers, one is a preservice teacher enrolled in the program, four left the education program in or after their first two years of coursework, and one graduated from the education program but opted not to teach. Table 1 displays each participant's experience and current standing. All participants' names are disguised as pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Academic Experience and Current Standing

Active& Pre-Service Teachers		
Participant ¹	Academic Experience	Current Standing
Tiffany	Math & Special Education major Traditional student	First year of teaching: 7th grade math
Jennifer	Math & Special Education major Traditional student	10 years of teaching: 8th grade pre-algebra
Michael	Secondary School Social Studies major Non-traditional student	10 years of teaching: social studies
Lawrence	Elementary & Special Education major Traditional student	First year of teaching: 4th grade
Robin	Elementary & Special Education major Traditional student	One year to program completion Goal of being a special educator Left Teaching

¹ Pseudonyms are used through the report

Table 1, cont.

Left Teaching		
Participant	Academic Experience	Current Standing
Kevin	Graduated with English major Left education after second semester	Employed as a full-time groundskeeper
Brandie	Graduated with Education major Opted not to teach	Enrolled in speech language pathologist master's program
Monique	Sociology major Left education after first semester	Enrolled undergraduate
Tamara	History major Left after fourth semester Non-traditional student	Enrolled undergraduate; working as a substitute teacher; plans to enroll in the MAT program
Daria	Liberal Studies major Left after fourth semester	Enrolled undergraduate; working in an EBD room; plans to enroll in the MAT program

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted of individually-conducted interviews with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and followed a semi-structured protocol. In addition to open-ended questions about participant backgrounds, each interview inquired into academic, social, and field-based experiences that influenced each participant's decision to stay or leave education. Questions also sought participant insight into what motivates and deters Black students from selecting education as a major. The semi-structured protocol enabled researchers to ask follow-up questions, providing space for participants to explore ideas and reconstruct experiences.

Data were analyzed within and across participants using a multistage approach. First cycle coding employed provisional codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) reflected in the extant literature and insights that emerged in the interview process. These provisional codes included the role of financial burdens, peer and professor relationships, key mentors, academic pressures, beliefs about schools, field experiences, and experiences of racism. In the

Dinkins and Thomas

subsequent cycles, these large, deductive codes were examined inductively across participants with the goal of identifying patterns. For example, the categories of ‘key mentors’ and ‘professor relationships’ were reduced and redefined as ‘key teachers who inspired.’ The final level of analysis involved examining the relationships between patterns to capture the dynamic and complex interaction of factors influencing students to remain in or leave education. Memos were used throughout to clarify relationships and test the strength of each final theme.

Findings

Data analysis yielded three core themes: a) the role K–16 teachers play in inspiring future educators, b) how a desire for social justice motivates African American undergraduate students to embrace or reject teaching as a career, and c) the role of standardized exams and financial barriers in preventing African Americans from completing TPPs.

Teachers, Particularly Black teachers, Motivated Participants

The majority of participants reported how teachers, particularly Black teachers, influenced their decision to major in education with all five active and preservice teachers reporting the positive influence of these mentors. While relationships with these teachers ranged from student-teacher relationships at the K–12 or collegiate levels to family members who were teachers, each active and preservice teacher credited these mentors with providing an example they wanted to replicate. For Lawrence and Tiffany, these teachers were family members and role models. Teachers in Lawrence’s family “kind of pushed me towards that too.” Tiffany’s experience helped her see how teaching is “just kind of in my blood.” Jennifer and Michael had African American teachers who made them think differently about themselves and infused them with a sense of mission. Jennifer described her 5th grade teacher, the only Black teacher she had:

She wasn’t going to allow us to use being poor or being disadvantaged as an excuse. She pushed us. When you grow up a certain way it’s not so much what people say but

how people treat you. When a kid hears that they are stupid through words or actions, those kids believe it. She was the first person who would not accept less from me. I had someone who set high expectations for me and what I do now is pay it forward.

Michael described a similar experience at the community college level with a professor who helped him see how education “can help us not just get a better job but give life more meaning.” From this professor, Michael decided he “wanted to do what he did for me—making the world have more sense.” Robin described how her father, a substitute teacher, encouraged the boys who sought him out at football games to know “they can be just as powerful as anybody else and that they shouldn’t feel less,” setting a benchmark for her to build “positive relationships with students.” An African American cooperating teacher in the field, however, was Robin’s strongest mentor: “she wants me to succeed more than anything.” For these participants, interactions with Black teachers contextualized the profession as both viable and important.

Of the five participants who opted out of teaching, Tamara and Daria described the influence of secondary teachers and Monique described the role of a university professor. Tamara’s sister is a special educator who, along with her parents, “are really encouraging me to do special education,” but it is her high school history teacher “who wasn’t African American” that gave her a note stating: “you will be a great teacher.” Daria identified her eighth grade teacher, “the only African American female teacher that I’ve ever had,” as “the most influential person in my educational career” because “as an African American woman I saw myself in her.” Similar to the students who persisted to become teachers, Tamara and Daria’s experiences demonstrate how interactions with teachers supported teaching as a career path.

Monique, a sociology major, described a comparably influential experience with a university professor who inspired her decision to leave education:

I don’t know if I would have found my love of sociology

Dinkins and Thomas

if it wasn't for [this professor] and I don't know if I would have been able to really dig into the topic if she wasn't African American. Seeing her—it's representation. I'm like, I can do that.

Monique's story echoes sentiments from Jennifer, Michael, Robin, and Daria who all encountered a Black educator who acted as a model and inspiration. Tiffany, Lawrence, and Tamara, on the other hand, saw Black educators as core pieces of their family life. Brandie and Kevin, who left teaching, did not feel inspired by a teacher.

A Sense of Social Justice Motivated Participants to Embrace and Reject Teaching

Every participant in this study made decisions about their college major based on a sense of social justice. Active teachers described this desire as an imperative to help Black students recognize their potential, understand their identity, and transcend poverty. For Lawrence and Tiffany, this meant being a role model. Lawrence described how "Kids need someone to look up to, especially someone of color because they do not really see that all the time." Tiffany recognized that her students "might not see an African American teacher again." She explained:

I want to educate them so they know how to respond to things appropriately and they don't always have to take what other students are dishing out. One of my white students likes to put her fingers in the Black students' hair. She thinks it feels nice, which to her is a compliment. I have to explain 'you can't do that if they're telling you no, don't touch my hair.' Then I have to explain to Black students, 'you don't have to let her do that.'

Jennifer explained why she worked in "tough schools." Specifically, in impoverished neighborhoods, if you don't see someone that looks like you, you don't think you can ever leave that situation. Part of the reason why I work at

at-risk schools is because I am what they need to see.

Michael envisioned teaching as a way to positively impact the lives of other Black males:

I wanted to do it at a high school level because most of my friends never escaped the trap of the condition we find ourselves in. You know, generational poverty, everything stereotypical of being a Black male applies, having multiple children with different women, still living at your mom's house even though you're old enough.

While Lawrence, Tiffany, Jessica, and Michael considered teaching to promote positive Black identity and student potential, Robin envisioned teaching in “rougher neighborhood public schools” designed for students with emotional-behavioral disorders: “I want to be at schools where I can help as much as I can and give these kids the education they deserve.”

Tamara and Daria, who both hope to return to teaching, described how they could expand possibilities for the next generation. Tamara’s motivation to teach is to be that person: “Just maybe they can look at me and say ‘I can be as great as my teacher is, I can be that teacher.’” Daria emphasized the current demand: “I clung to the person that I saw myself in and, you look at students now, and they are not around someone they can relate to on every level, academically and culturally, and there is a lack there.”

The same social justice imperative motivated participants to leave teaching. Brandie, whose goal is to become a speech therapist, explained her drive to give individuals “access to communication.” She majored in education because she “saw an element of teaching within speech therapy” and realized she might decide “to take it into the schools.” Monique’s interest in social justice helped motivate her to choose sociology over education. She recognized that teachers make a difference but believed she “could be better for the community” if she made change on a “community, country-wide, state kind of scale.” Kevin described how his social idealism empowered him to recognize how schools contribute to “devaluing

Dinkins and Thomas

the Black male”:

The lack of educational resources, financial resources, economic, even down to the food we’re given. For me, going into the classroom—’cause we learn a lot of this stuff in school—I didn’t want to be someone that pushed that agenda. I didn’t want to be the one who told my class that certain things were true or certain things had happened when really they didn’t. I just didn’t want to lie to my students, basically.

He also rejected the roles that he had seen many African American male teachers play in schools:

I didn’t want to be a disciplinarian. The stigma of you’re a Black male, so you must have friends that act like this, you may come from a neighborhood where these kids come from. You’re expected to automatically relate to these kids and to try to change the way that they think. I wasn’t up to that task.

Kevin’s withdrawal from teaching was interwoven with his identity. By refusing to participate in a system he viewed as racially biased, he refused to participate in the oppression of others. While the outcomes of their decisions were different, each participant was motivated by a desire to make the world better.

Financial Barriers and Standardized Exams Pushed Two Participants out of Education

The majority of participants discussed the financial challenges of college: Eight reported receiving scholarships and two reported being encumbered by debt. Of the eight who received scholarships, six reported selecting the university because it was the best scholarship package they received. One participant, Robin, who received a small scholarship package and reported “like \$40,000 in debt,” plans to teach in a low-income school to qualify for loan repayment. Daria is the only participant who identified financial burdens as “her sole reason” for leaving in the teacher education program

but not as an obstacle to becoming a teacher. As a non-traditional student, Daria entered the education program with “70–80 credit hours already.” She described how the structure of the program “basically put me in a place where I would have to start all over again.” Her financial aid package would not sustain this extra burden so she decided “to change my major to liberal studies and come back” for the Masters of Arts in Teaching program. While Daria was not the only student to discuss financial pressures, she was the only student who reported financial challenges as her reason for leaving education.

Tamara identified the Praxis I entrance exam as her only barrier to continuing in the school of education: “I’ve took it three times. I was struggling with the math and that was it.” After taking the test a third time, Tamara opted to complete her bachelor’s degree in history. Feeling “frustrated...and a little defeated,” Tamara insisted, “I have to just pass it because I want to be a teacher.” While other participants recalled their anxiety over these entrance exams and several shared the financial strain these tests placed on them, no other participant reported struggling to pass.

Discussion

While the findings of this study cannot be generalized, the perceptions and experiences of participants are consistent with much of the extant literature about African Americans and TPPs.

All the participants in the study indicated that social justice motivated their decision to enter as well as leave the School of Education. Research on preservice teachers consistently demonstrates that teachers of color enter the profession to improve the education and lives of students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Furthermore, Black teachers view teaching as a “calling” and often return to their communities to teach (Lynn, 2006), thereby practicing the philosophy of “lifting as we climb” (Irvine, 2002).

The lack of Black teachers serving as mentors in the classroom may be the most significant barrier to Blacks entering teaching (Bianco, Leech & Mitchell, 2011; Graham & Erwin, 2011). All five participants who remained in education discussed the importance

of encountering a Black teacher who inspired them. Four of these participants discussed the influence of Black K–12 teachers, emphasizing the need for Black teachers in K–12 schools. Two participants indicated the importance of Black teachers in higher education. Michael, who began his post-secondary career at a community college, selected education as his major after encountering a Black professor. Monique switched her major from education to sociology after encountering a Black sociology professor. Clearly, the need for Black teachers reaches beyond the K–12 classroom into higher education. Because of the influence Black teachers have on students, this dearth creates a cyclical problem. As noted by Smith, Mack and Akyea (2004), the lack of African American teachers leads Black students to conclude that teaching is “better suited for Whites” (p. 77) and that education is not a career option for African American students. TPPs can address this problem by placing candidates in the field with African American teachers (Scott & Rodriguez, 2014) and by recruiting and hiring more African American faculty (Talbert-Johnson & Tillman, 1999).

Literature also supports the role of financial challenges (Bireda & Chait, 2011). Financial challenges were a primary concern for most of our participants; however, because eight participants received some form of scholarships the university successfully ameliorated this pressure. Even with the university being proactively supportive of Black students, finances still proved a significant barrier for one participant. TPPs must work on the state and national level to increase scholarships and support for loan forgiveness for African American teachers (Villegas & Davis, 2007). Standardized tests for admission to TPPs and teacher licensure are also barriers to African American candidates (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Institutional support can greatly assist students in passing teacher licensure exams (Farinde, LeBlanc & Otten, 2015); TPPs can support African American students by developing test preparation programs (Hunter, 2009) and by providing training for faculty to assist them in preparing candidates for success on licensure exams during their coursework (Fuller & Scheft, n.d.).

Today’s K–12 classrooms illustrate the disparity between the

number of Black students and Black teachers. With this disparity in mind, we sought to understand the lack of Black teachers exiting our own teacher preparation program. Specifically, we wanted to understand why Black teacher candidates opted to persist in education or leave the major. Our findings support the importance of Black K–12 and higher education teachers who serve as mentors to teacher candidates. Additionally, findings indicate the need for institutional support in both finances and test preparation. Findings from this study can assist other predominantly white institutions in supporting the matriculation of Black teacher education candidates.

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Dinkins and Thomas

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Dinkins and Thomas

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